



June 27, 2002

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2002-165

Controversial Maryland priest renounces ECUSA orders

by Jan Nunley

(ENS) In a fiery statement to the press, reminiscent of his writings before accepting a call to be a rector in small-town Maryland, the Rev. Samuel Lee Edwards on June 27 renounced his orders as a priest of the Episcopal Church, which he denounced as a "cartel of ecclesiastical despots."

The controversial priest, canonically resident in the Diocese of Fort Worth, said he has asked to be received as a priest in the [Anglican Province of Christ the King](#) (APCK), a breakaway church formed in 1977 to protest the ordination of women and the proposed revision of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer by the Episcopal Church. Edwards' attorney, Charles Nalls, was recently ordained as a priest in the APCK. The Diocese of Fort Worth is one of three Episcopal dioceses whose bishops refuse to ordain or license women priests.

Edwards said he plans to "remain in Southern Maryland for the purpose of assisting in the establishment there of a new congregation" of the APCK. "I believe that I have done all that I can do in the effort to recall The Episcopal Church to its godly heritage of evangelical faith and catholic order," the statement said. "That effort, and my part in it, appears to have been unsuccessful."

A 'hell-bound' Unchurch

Edwards, the vestry of Christ Church and St. John's Parish in Accokeek, Maryland, and then-bishop of

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Washington *pro tempore* Jane Holmes Dixon have been battling in the ecclesiastical and secular courts for almost 18 months over Edwards' attempts to become rector of the parish. The saga began in the fall of 2000, when Edwards first received a call from the vestry.

At the time, Edwards was wrapping up his term as executive director of Forward in Faith/North America (FIF/NA), successor to two previous organizations formed to oppose the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. His teachings concerning the Episcopal Church, widely published in the group's magazine *FOUNDATIONS*, included a 1997 editorial calling ECUSA "the Unchurch," a 1998 editorial saying that ECUSA practices "institutionalized lawlessness," a 2000 editorial saying that the "machinery" of the Episcopal Church is "hell-bound" and advocating "gumming up the works," and another 2000 editorial urging clergy and congregations to "sever their connections" with ECUSA.

When the Christ Church vestry informed Dixon in December that they planned to elect Edwards as rector, she scheduled a meeting with the Fort Worth priest to discuss the call, which he then cancelled and rescheduled for a date six weeks later. That became a point of contention between them, for when Dixon [rejected](#) Edwards' call on the grounds that he was "not qualified" to be a rector in the Washington diocese, Edwards and the vestry claimed that Dixon had exceeded the amount of time allocated to a bishop to reject a vestry's choice of rector. Dixon and diocesan attorneys countered that, while there is a 30-day limit for bishops to respond to a notice of intent to elect a particular priest, no such limit is implied in the canons for a bishop's response to the results of an election, including refusal to accept the priest as a rector.

Court rules for bishop

Regardless, Edwards moved into the parish's rectory and continued to function as a priest even after a 60-day limit had passed during which he could do so without a license from the bishop. When Dixon then [visited](#) the congregation, parish leaders refused to allow her to function as a bishop on the church's grounds and threatened to have her and her aides and supporters arrested for trespassing. The case was brought before a Federal judge,

who [ruled](#) that Dixon, as the ecclesiastical authority of the diocese, should be given full access to the parish, and ordered Edwards to vacate the rectory. A Federal appeals court [upheld](#) the ruling.

Both Dixon and Edwards were charged with violations of the church's canons by competing groups of clergy.

The [charges](#) against Dixon were dropped.

The [charges](#) against Edwards were pending in Fort Worth's ecclesiastical court, but the trial has been cancelled in light of the renunciation of his ministry in the Episcopal Church.

Departure a 'tragedy'

In his press statement, Edwards said that the Episcopal Church "now stands revealed as an enemy of Evangelical Faith, Catholic Truth, Apostolic Order, and Godly Life" and accused "the vast majority" of its bishops of being "complicit... either by their active support of Jane Dixon's aggression or by their craven acquiescence in it."

"Thanks to Jane Dixon and her allies and sponsors, the Episcopal Church stands revealed as an institution that still wears the vesture of constitutionality, but which in reality has become a cartel of ecclesiastical despots who, because only they are allowed authoritatively and individually to interpret the law of the Church, are themselves above that law," Edwards wrote. "The Episcopal Church thus has no constitutional order worthy of the name. Its constitution and canons are of no more significance to its real life than was the constitution of the former Soviet Union, which served only to cloak in the appearance of justice and order the lust for power and dominion."

Edwards urged "those who believe as Anglicans traditionally have believed" to leave the Episcopal Church "with what we can carry even if such be only our souls."

In a [statement](#) issued the same day as Edwards', Fort Worth bishop Jack Iker said that he received the priest's notification "with deep regret" and called it a "tragedy that yet another traditionalist priest has been so marginalized and persecuted by the liberal establishment of ECUSA." Iker said that, following the consent of the diocesan

standing committee, he will impose a sentence of deposition on Edwards.

The newly consecrated bishop of Washington, John Chane, refused to comment on Edwards' decision, as did the senior warden of Christ Church, Barbara Sturman.

Original documents related to the Christ Church, Accokeek controversy are available as PDF files on the Episcopal Diocese of Washington's web site in the section marked [Press Releases](#) for 2000 and 2001.

--The Rev. Jan Nunley is deputy director of Episcopal News Service.